

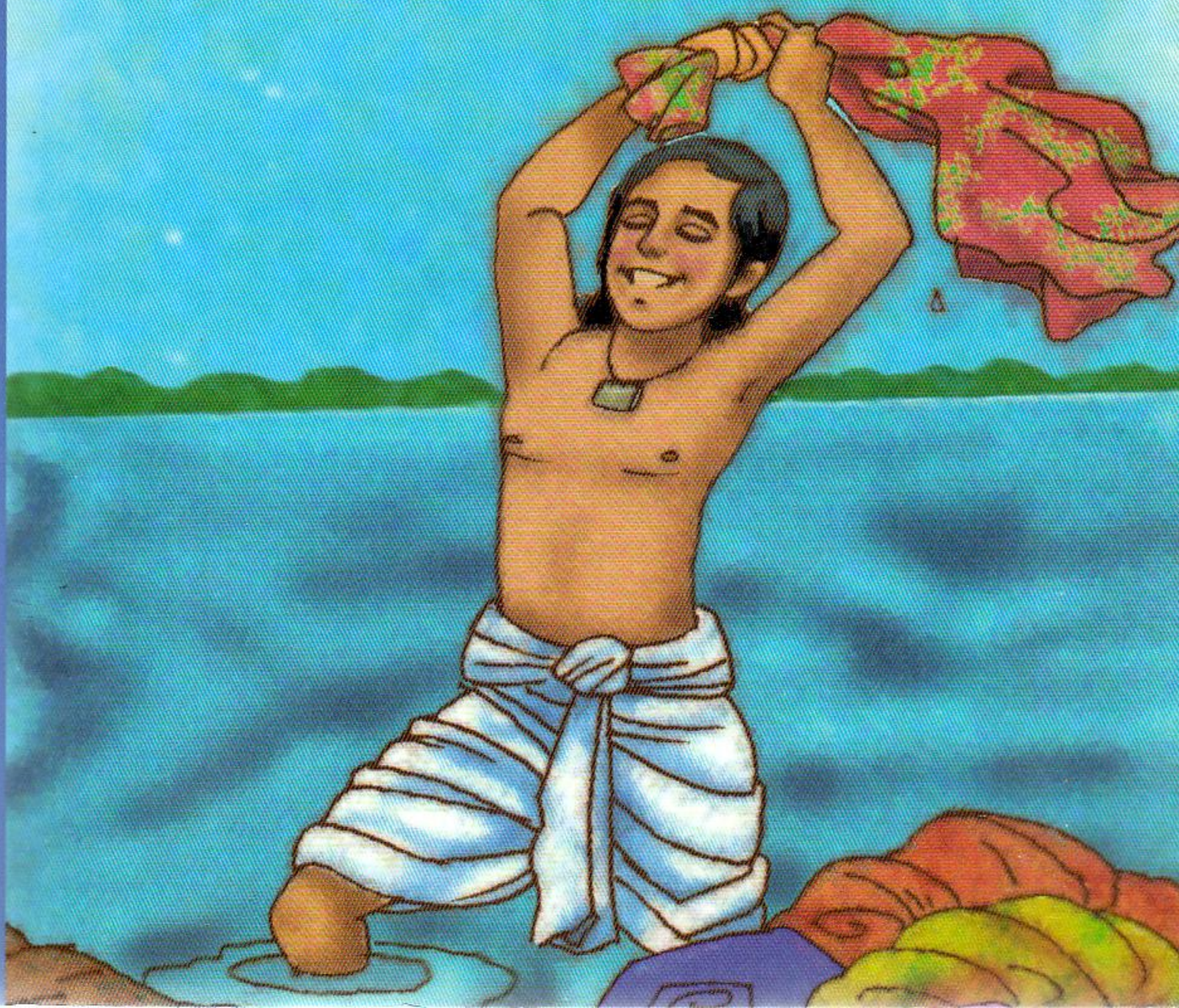


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BISHNU THE DHOBI SINGER

Subhadra Sen Gupta
Tapas Guha

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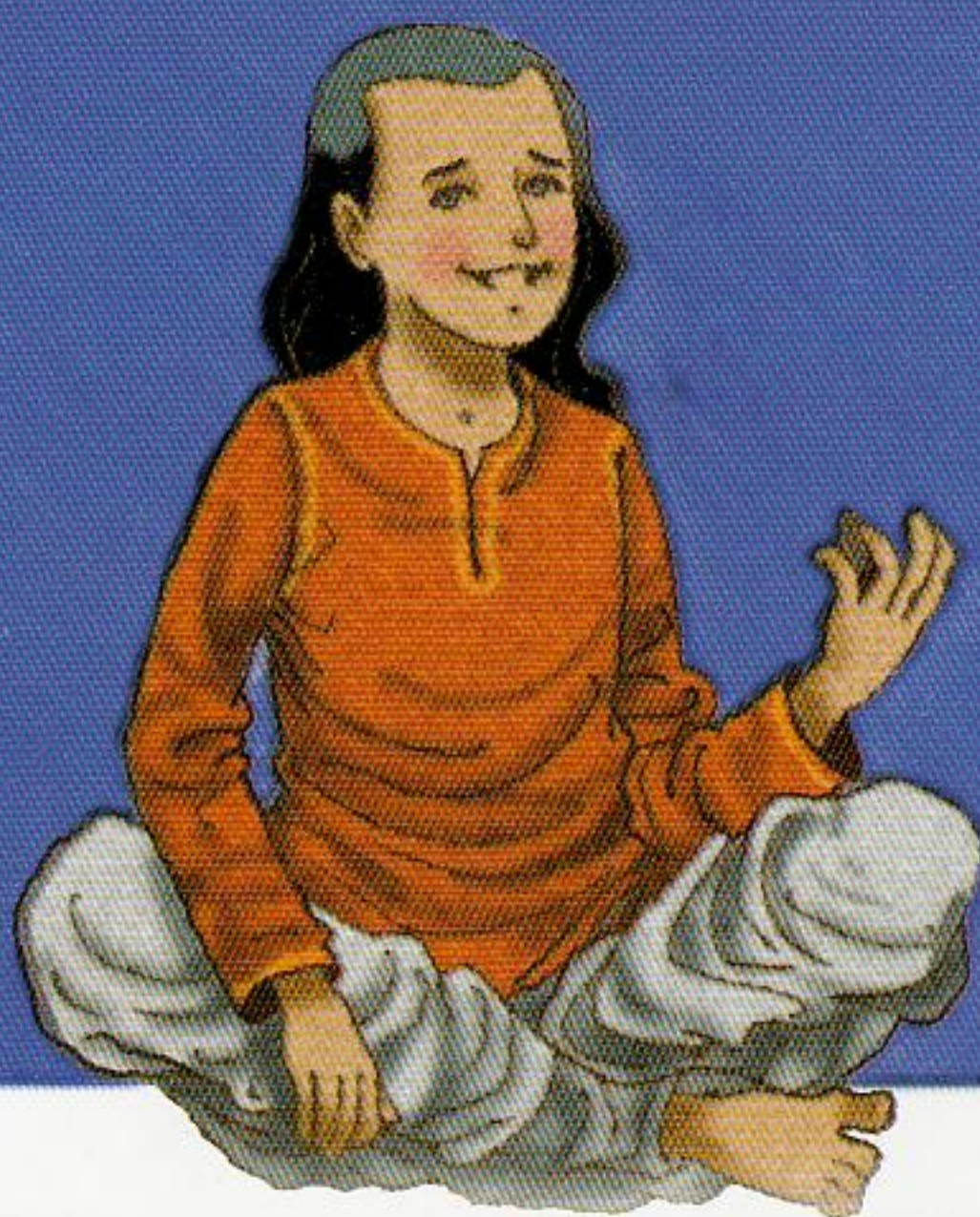


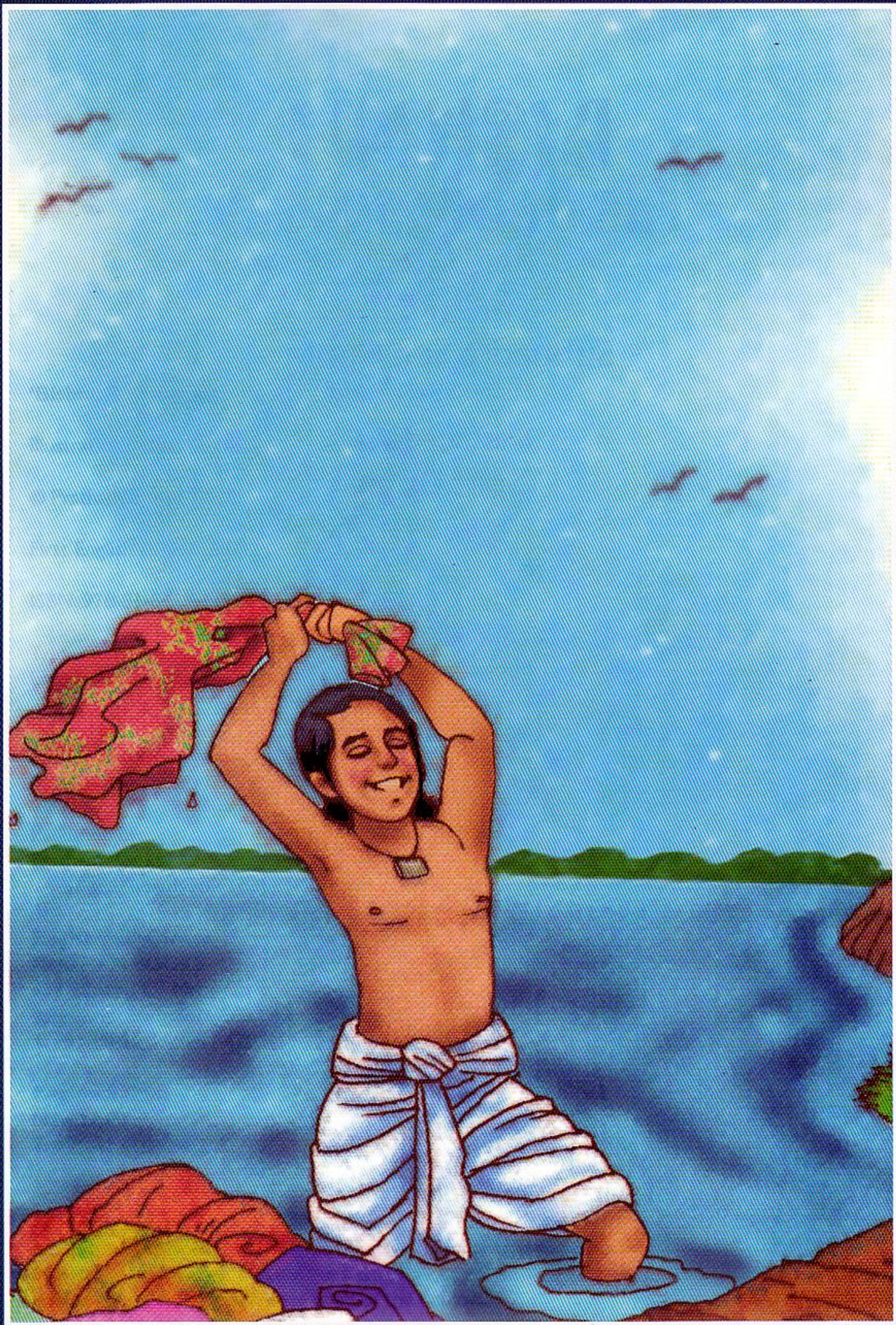
BISHNU

THE DHOBI SINGER

Written by
Subhadra Sen Gupta

Illustrated by
Tapas Guha





Chapter One

SINGING BY THE RIVER

For days, they had been talking of nothing else in the streets of Agra. The famous *qawwali* singer, the great *Ustad* Badlu Khan of Dilli was coming to sing in the city.

Of course, he would first perform before Emperor Akbar. Then some of the nobles at the court of Fatehpur Sikri had also invited him to sing at their *havelis*. But what had got Bishnu so excited was that the amazing Badlu Khan had kindly agreed to a *qawwali* programme in the city, and it was open to the public.

A huge tent had been put up near the Dariba market. People who came early would get seats inside but the others would have to rough it out in the open air. So Bishnu and his elder brother Laxman had decided not to leave anything to chance. The two boys left home right after lunch, even though the *qawwali* show was to start at dusk. Even then, they managed to get seats only mid-way down the tent. There were people who had come even earlier!

Bishnu did not mind the long wait as he sat there wrapped up in a shawl against the cold evening air. He watched everything being made ready for the show. The stage was being decorated with flowers, the tall oil lamps kept ready at the corner and the mattresses and cushions were laid down. Then, as the sun began to set, Badlu Khan and his team of singers and musicians came up on stage to thunderous applause. Bishnu's



eyes shone, his heart beating with excitement. Finally, he was going to hear some good music!

The musicians took a while to tune their instruments. The drummer tapped his drum, the *sarangi* player played a few quick notes as Badlu Khan's assistants straightened their caps and cleared their throats. Badlu Khan sat in the middle, wearing a red *angarkha* and white pyjamas, his broad moustachioed face gleaming by the light of the lamps. Then, as he cleared his throat, the people fell silent and he began to sing. Bishnu sat up, his whole mind concentrated on the singer and his song. He forgot about the crowd around him, his brother beside him, all he heard and felt was the music.

As Badlu Khan sang, the chorus would join in after him like an echo, at times softly, at times loudly, clapping all the while to keep the beat. The *sarangi* droned on, the drums kept the beat and at points where Badlu Khan sang well or the words of the song were particularly beautiful, the crowd would murmur "*Wah! Wah!*"

When the first song was half way through, Bishnu was softly singing along. He didn't know the words properly but he had already picked up the tune. Sitting up straight, his large eyes fixed on Badlu Khan, he was humming away.

Then as the second song began, within a few lines Bishnu had again learnt the tune. He did not notice, but the man sitting on his left turned to look at him and then bent his head closer to hear what Bishnu was humming. All through the show the man kept glancing at Bishnu, noticing Bishnu's smile of delight when Badlu Khan sang well, the slight frown when he didn't like the tune, as well as the shake of his head when the drummer missed a beat.

It was late when the show was over. Bishnu turned to Laxman with a shining smile, "Wasn't that great *Bhaiya*?"



Laxman yawned, he wasn't so crazy about music as his younger brother, "Sure, quite nice but it went on too long. I was falling asleep by the end."

"How could you fall asleep when Badlu Khan was singing?" Bishnu asked, scandalized. "He is the greatest *qawwali* singer in the kingdom!" Laxman shrugged and yawned again.

"So you liked the music?" A deep voice spoke beside Bishnu. Getting up, Bishnu turned to look at the man who had asked the question. In the shadowy darkness of the tent, all he saw was a middle-aged man with greying hair and large, thoughtful eyes. The man had wrapped a dark shawl around him.

"Yes I did."

"All the songs?"

Bishnu paused, looking up into the large eyes and then said hesitantly, "Well actually... not all of them."

"Why not? You didn't like the tunes?"

"It's not that." Bishnu looked thoughtful, trying to put into words what he had felt, "Remember that song..." and he softly hummed the tune. The man's eyes widened as he nodded. "Well I think Badlu Khan went a bit off key at times."

"Really Bishnu!" Laxman interrupted him hurriedly. "Forgive my brother Sir," he said to the man, "but he tries to be too clever sometimes."

The man smiled, "Well, actually, I agree with him."

"Also," Bishnu went on briskly, "that drummer wasn't too good, was he? Lost the beat quite a few times." Again the man gave a startled glance at Bishnu's young face and then nodded in agreement.

"Which song did you like best?" the man asked.

Once more, after a moment's thought, Bishnu hummed the tune he'd liked. The man looked down at Bishnu and said urgently, "What's your name child? Where do you stay? I'd like to hear you sing."

"I'm Bishnu. You can always find me at the *dhobi ghat*."



"*Dhobi ghat?!*" the man looked very surprised. "Why at the *dhobi ghat, beta?*"

"Because my father's a washer-man," Bishnu grinned, "and so am I *huzoor*. So if you want to hear me sing, come to the *dhobi ghat* on the banks of the Jamuna River any day! I'm always there washing the clothes."

"And singing really loudly." Laxman added.

The man nodded, "I think I will, Bishnu."

On the long walk home, Bishnu thought absently that he had not asked the man his name. But then he forgot all about it as he dreamed again about songs and music and what Badlu Khan had sung that night. He had no problem remembering the tunes, but he wished he could learn the words just as quickly.

Next morning, at the *dhobi ghat* on the banks of the river, to the beat of wet clothes slapping on the stones, Bishnu sang. There was a rhythm, he had discovered, in the way his father and brother washed the clothes. One two three slap! One two three slap! It was so easy to fit a song to it. Bishnu had made up the words as he went along, but the tune was the one he had heard somewhere before. So working away, his young, high voice doodling around the tune to the slapping and sloshing beat, Bishnu sang happily.

"What a lovely lovely day! Slap!

Washing saris blue and grey. Slap! Slap!

Kurta, pyjamas red and blue. Slap!

Chunnis, dhotis, turbans too. Slap! Slap!"

The singing made the work a bit more interesting for Bishnu as he and his mother and sister took the wet clothes from his father and laid them out to dry. Rows and rows of colourful clothes were drying on the sunny banks of the Jamuna river. Then Bishnu ran about shooing away the cows and goats, while waiting for the clothes to dry.



Down the river at regular intervals, were the large, flat stones on which the washer-men cleaned clothes. Everyone working at this *dhobi ghat* enjoyed Bishnu's singing. With every new song, they knew the words would make them laugh because Bishnu was a smart little monkey. The tunes always made them sway because they were always so beautiful.

They all called him Bishnu, The Dhobi Singer. He could sing as much as he liked but as a poor man's son he would still have to make a living washing clothes. None of them knew of Bishnu's secret dreams.

Bishnu knew all about the great singers at Emperor Akbar's court. There was Baz Bahadur, who had once been the ruler of Malwa. When Akbar marched into Malwa, he had been defeated by the Mughal army but Akbar had not killed him. Instead, he had invited him to the royal court because of his fame as a musician.

Then there was Mian Tansen. He was the royal singer at the court of the Raja of Rewa and his fame had spread far and wide. Finally Akbar had asked for him as a gift and the Raja of Rewa could not refuse. After all, who could say no to a mighty Mughal? Now Tansen lived at Akbar's royal court at Fatehpur Sikri and sang for the Mughal king and his queens.

One day I want to hear them sing, Bishnu dreamed — Baz Bahadur and Mian Tansen. And then I'd like to learn to sing from an *Ustad* or a maestro and I'd work so hard and sing so beautifully that I'd be welcomed to the court. Bishnu would dream on, until he remembered that he was the son of a poor washer-man and his dreams would fade away.

Later that afternoon, Bishnu sat alone by the river guarding the rows of clothes drying on the grass. He was singing again, while keeping the beat by hitting his stick against a broken pot lying there. "You do sing well," a familiar deep voice spoke behind him.

Bishnu turned to see the tall figure of the man he had met



the night before at the *qawwali* show. He squinted up into the sun and grinned, "Well, I sing all the time, so I've a lot of practice. That's why all the washer-men at the *ghat* call me the dhobi singer."

The man laughed, "Hmmm, I like the name too!"

"I didn't really expect you to come, Sir," Bishnu said honestly. "Rich people don't come to the *dhobi ghat*."

"I do want to hear you sing. So sing for me, dhobi singer." and the man came and sat down beside Bishnu on the grass.

In the bright daylight, Bishnu now saw the man properly. He was in his forties with hair and his droopy moustache touched with grey. His clothes were simple but well made. A thin muslin *angarkha* heavily embroidered in front, loose pyjamas and good leather *nagra* shoes. The turban that he took off and laid beside him, was of silk.

Looks like a rich man, Bishnu decided. He had seen many on the streets of Agra, riding past on horses. But he must be a little mad to come all the way to bank of the Jamuna just to hear me sing, especially after a night of Badlu Khan's lovely music. He must have money to spend, concluded Bishnu.

"But *huzoor*, I don't sing for free," he said coolly.

The man smiled, "If your song is good, you'll get the reward it deserves."

"What kind of reward? I'd like it to be in cash," Bishnu continued bravely.

The man shook his head, pulled out a handful of copper paisa coins that he put into Bishnu's hand and said, "Now will you sing?"

Bishnu nodded, giving a quick, flashing smile and then clearing his throat, got ready to sing. Sitting beside the gently flowing waters of the river, Bishnu sang his songs to the stranger — all the songs that he had made up about washing clothes and the sun on the river; of his donkey and pet goat; of hot dusty winds and cold breezes.



The listening man smiled at the words but every time Bishnu started a new tune, the man would give him a startled glance. After the third song, he looked curiously at Bishnu, "I can see the words are your own, but where did you learn those tunes?"

"Oh! I hear them here and there," Bishnu said casually.

"Those were *thumris* and *raags*, no one sings them on the streets."

"Well..." Bishnu chewed his lips thoughtfully, "You won't tell anyone?" the man nodded.

"A courtesan lives in the house behind ours. She practices these tunes every morning. I sleep on the roof of our house, so I can hear her sing."

"You've learnt the tunes like that?" the man's eyes widened in surprise, "...just by listening?"

"Yes. I never forget a tune once I hear it," and again Bishnu hummed the song he had liked at Badlu Khan's show, "Remember this song from last night?"

The man reached into his pocket and then laid a big silver rupee coin before Bishnu and said, "Now sing the tunes the way you heard the courtesan sing them."

Bishnu had begun to enjoy himself. Somehow he wanted to sing for this stranger because he felt the man understood. So taking a deep breath, he began to sing the wordless tune that he only sang when he was alone. It was his special song.

Bishnu closed his eyes as his high young voice rose in the still air of the afternoon. He did not know why, but the tune always made him think of a mellow monsoon day, the smell of wet earth after the rains, of a sky heavy with clouds.

As Bishnu sang, the stranger sat still, his eyes closed. He swayed a bit when Bishnu sang really well, as if the music made him do so. Then as Bishnu softly brought the melody to a close, he shook his head as if in wonder and opened his eyes.

"It's my favourite tune," Bishnu said. "Did you like it?"



"It's *Raag Malhar*," the man said softly. "One of my favourites too." Bishnu thought the man was about to get up and go away, and it made him surprisingly sad. "Will you come again, Sir?"

"Do you want me to?"

"Yes, because you understand... you know about music..." Bishnu struggled to explain something that he couldn't put into words, "no one here..."

"Would you like to learn singing, Bishnu?"

"I can't. We don't have any money. My brother Laxman even asked an *Ustad* once but he said he doesn't teach the children of washer-men."

"He's not a true *Ustad* then. I would like to teach you. Would you like that?"

"Oh yes!" Bishnu's eyes brightened and then his face fell. "But you forget, we don't have the money."

"I'm not asking for any, I have enough. But there is one condition, you'll have to leave your family and come and stay with me."

"Where?"

"At Fatehpur Sikri. It's a long journey. Come with your brother. At the gate, tell the guards you've been invited by Tansen. I'll leave word for you."

"Tansen! You are Mian Tansen? Huh!" Bishnu looked disbelievingly at the man, "That's impossible! No horse! No fancy clothes! You are walking on the banks of the Jamuna alone. The real Tansen would never do that. He'd ride an elephant and wear jewels. He is the best singer in the kingdom!"

The man hid a smile, "Come to Fatehpur Sikri and see." He got up, put on his turban and shoes, ruffled Bishnu's tousled head and said, "I'll wait for you tomorrow," and then walked away, a tall shadow against the setting sun.

Late into the night, Bishnu's family debated what to do. His parents didn't really believe his story. Only Laxman understood



how badly Bishnu wanted to learn music and he was willing to give it a try.

“What can happen, Babuji?” he asked his father. “At the most, the guards will throw us out.”

“What about the expenses? It’ll cost a packet to take a tonga to Fatehpur Sikri.”

“We’ll go in our horse cart, there are no clothes to be delivered tomorrow anyway. If we start early enough, we’ll be in Sikri by noon and we’ll get back by nightfall. And we can manage the money, remember the rupee the man gave Bishnu?”

Bishnu’s father shrugged, still not convinced, but then looking at his young son’s pleading face, he relented. It was finally decided that the next morning, Laxman and Bishnu would travel from Agra to Fatehpur Sikri, to meet Mian Tansen, Emperor Akbar’s favourite singer.





Chapter Two

AT FATEHPUR SIKRI

At dawn the next morning, Laxman and Bishnu climbed on to their rickety horse cart with a bundle of thick chapatis, pickle and onions for lunch and an earthen *surahi* filled with water. In a separate bundle, Bishnu had carefully packed their two best jackets to wear over their kurtas. After all, if they did manage to enter Emperor Akbar's capital city, they should be dressed right. As he told Laxman, the guards won't let them in if they looked like dhobis.

Bishnu was feeling both excited and nervous. The happenings of the day before and at Badlu Khan's recital, all seemed a bit like a dream to him and he wondered if they were going on a wild goose chase. Laxman was, of course, enjoying himself thoroughly and had no doubts at all that going to Fatehpur Sikri was a great idea.

Slapping their sleepy old horse to make it move faster, he grinned at the nervous face of his twelve-year-old brother, "Hey! Stop looking so worried! Even if it was some man making a fool of you yesterday and not Tansen, it doesn't matter. You earned some money by your singing and today we have got an outing to Sikri. Imagine! No clothes to wash for a whole day! Cheer up!" Bishnu only smiled weakly.

The road wandered through fields and mango groves, past ponds and villages. They stopped for an early lunch in the



shadow of a huge peepul tree. It was a couple of hours past noon when they saw the stone walls of Fatehpur Sikri, snaking up the hills before them. And behind the walls they could make out the roofs of the houses and the royal palaces. Bishnu felt his heart beginning to thud.

The winding road went steeply up the hill and the cart creaked past rows of shops. All the way up the hill were the houses the noblemen had built. Their *havelis* here were meant to keep them near the royal court when Akbar shifted his capital from Agra to his new city.

Then they went through a busy bazaar with shops on both sides, where the shopkeepers were calling out to customers selling clothes, jewellery, brass, pottery and furniture. The road was busy with people and the two brothers watched the richly dressed people, wide-eyed, buying things at the shops. 'Everyone seemed to be wearing jewels and silk!' Bishnu thought in wonder, 'this place is even better than Agra's Kinari Bazaar!' Soldiers galloped past on horses with swords and spears glinting in the sun. *Palkis* swayed by, carried on the shoulders of four men and Bishnu wondered who sat inside, behind the curtains.

They asked their way to the palaces and were told to go right to the top of the hill. After going past a couple of gates, they reached the last gate set before high walls, behind which were the palaces of the emperor and the offices of the Mughal empire.

"Halt!" a soldier yelled and held out a spear to block their way. The man clumped up closer and raised a bored moustachioed face up to them "Where do you think you two are going?"

"We..." Laxman's throat was dry, he had not really expected to meet soldiers, "I mean... we've come to meet Mian Tansen."

"Mian Tansen? Really?" The face was beginning to look irritated, "You know who he is, boys?"



"Yes," said Bishnu. "He's the royal singer."

"And since when has our royal singer started meeting peasants?"

"He asked us to come today," Laxman pleaded. "Please believe me, I'm not lying. This is my brother Bishnu, he sings and Mian Tansen promised to teach..."

The soldier began to laugh, then he waved to the other guard to come closer, "Have you heard this one? Mian Tansen is going to teach this peasant boy to sing! We're supposed to believe that!"

Laxman looked at Bishnu and shrugged. The two soldiers were still laughing. Then they drew closer, looking angrily at the two scared boys. The first soldier raised his spear threateningly and said, "Go! We have no time for your fairy-tales."

"Please..." in desperation Bishnu had found his voice, "Will you check inside? He'd promised to leave a message at the gate, so I could be let in."

No longer amused, the soldiers just waved them away and began to walk back to the gate, thumping their spears.

With a hopeless shake of his head, Laxman began to turn the cart around, back towards Agra. Bishnu turned to look back and saw a man come running out of the palace gate, waving his arm and calling, "Wait! Are you Bishnu?"

"Yes!" Bishnu yelled back, springing down from the cart to run towards the man, "I'm Bishnu!"

The man went up to the guard and said, "My master, Mian Tansen, sent me to wait at the gate for a boy called Bishnu. My master expects him today."

The first guard looked at the two relieved boys with a puzzled frown, "Are you sure? These peasants?"

"Dhobis," said Bishnu shortly.

"He sings," Laxman informed everyone proudly. "Mian Tansen's heard him too."

"Park your cart here and follow me," Tansen's servant said. "I'm Kesho. My master is waiting for you inside."



The two royal guards still looked like they couldn't believe their eyes. As if in a daze, forgetting to put on their fancy jackets, the two boys tied their old horse to a fence and followed Tansen's servant Kesho into the palace complex of Fatehpur Sikri.

They skirted past beautifully laid gardens with beds of roses and tinkling fountains and then walked through courtyards and past red sandstone palaces with beautifully carved walls and pillars. Their eyes wide in wonder, minds whirling at the beauty around them, they walked to a small pillared house with a verandah all around it. It was tucked away in one corner of a garden, right up against the edge of the hill.

As they got closer, Bishnu knew it had to be the home of Tansen because the notes of music came wafting towards him. The drone of a *tanpura* accompanied a deep voice raised in song. Kesho motioned them to stop at the door of the *baithak*, then pushing aside the *chik* curtain went inside. The singing stopped. There was a murmur of voices and a few moments later, Kesho came out and waved them in. Taking a shaky breath, Bishnu entered the house of the greatest singer in the land.

The tall stranger who had chatted with him at Badlu Khan's recital, who sat on the grass beside him on the bank of the Jamuna and heard him sing, really was Tansen. Bishnu sighed with relief. He went up to Tansen where he sat on a *divan*, tuning a *tanpura*. The same calm smiling eyes looked at Bishnu's flushed face and said with a laugh in his voice, "Come in, my dhobi singer."

Immediately, Bishnu felt all right. His heart stopped thudding in his ears and he felt safe and quietly happy. There was something in those amused, welcoming eyes before him that made him feel so. Bishnu's large eyes shone, as a cheeky grin split his thin, dark face, "So you really are Mian Tansen! Thank God!"



Laxman who was bowing deeply, as he had seen rich people do, turned to glare angrily at his brother.

"Looks like it. Did you doubt who I was?"

"Well, you can never be sure," Bishnu grinned back, and then went forward to touch Tansen's feet. "This is my *barey bhaiya* Laxman, *huzoor*. He is sixteen and he drove the horse cart all the way from Agra."

"Don't call me *huzoor*," Tansen waved them to sit on the thick Persian carpet on the floor, "If you become my *shagird* Bishnu, you'll call me *Ustadji*. A student always calls his teacher that." Bishnu nodded.

Kesho came carrying a tray with glasses of cool sherbet. The boys, thirsty after their long day, took refreshing gulps of the lime and mint flavoured drink. Then Bishnu leaned forward and asked curiously, "*Ustadji*, what were you singing just now?"

"It is a composition called a *thumri*."

"You sing much better than Badlu Khan." Bishnu nodded solemnly. "Much, much better."

"Oh really? I am so grateful you think so!" Tansen's eyes gleamed with amusement.

Bishnu smiled back at the ironic reply and then he added urgently, "*Ustadji* will you teach me this song please? I really liked the last bit when you..."

"Wait! Wait!" laughed the singer. "You haven't even begun yet. You have to first learn the *sargam*, the musical notes."

"Oh you mean that *sa-re-ga* thing? I know that already! The courtesan I told you about? Well, she starts every morning with those notes. Let's start now," said Bishnu, putting down the glass of sherbet and looking up expectantly at Tansen. Sitting there cross-legged at the singer's feet, eyes wide, waiting.

Bemused, Tansen studied the huge eyes in the thin, dark, young face looking up at him with such complete trust. He had never seen a boy like this before. There had been many young talented students, but never had he met this hunger for music



in such a young boy. Bishnu, the dhobi singer, was something else altogether.

"Bishnu, you are sure you want to learn music from me?" Tansen asked. "Because to become a good singer, you will have to work very hard for many years. It is not easy being a *shagird* of an *Ustad*..."

Bishnu nodded, swallowed and then said softly, "More than anything in the world. That is the only thing I have ever wanted to do."

"Fine. Then to make you my student I'm going to tie a thread on your wrist. This ceremony is called tying the *ganda*." Lost for words, Bishnu nodded breathlessly.

Tansen clapped his hands. Kesho came in bearing a plate on which there was a lighted lamp, flowers and a length of thick thread dyed red. First Tansen checked with Laxman that their father had given his permission to Bishnu's becoming a student of the singer. Then he asked Bishnu again to make sure that the boy understood what he was agreeing to. Bishnu nodded a bit impatiently.

Tansen prayed quietly and tied the red thread around Bishnu's thin right wrist. He put a *tika* on Bishnu's forehead and laid a gentle hand on the tousled head in blessing. "Now that I have tied the *ganda* you are my *shagird* Bishnu and I am your *Ustad*. You'll have to obey every command of mine, even if you don't like what I say. Complete obedience to your *Ustad* is the only way to learn music."

Bishnu nodded. "I'll do anything you say, *Ustadji*. Just teach me to sing."

"It's not going to be easy. You'll have to come and stay here, away from your family. We'll begin lessons every morning at dawn, it is called *riyaz* and you'll do your *riyaz* for many hours every single day. You'll have to work very hard. It's not like sitting on the banks of the Jamuna and singing for fun."

"Anything you say," Bishnu said trustingly and then a new



thought struck him and he sat up. "Stay with you here, *Ustadji*? Does that mean I won't have to help with the washing any more? My father won't like that!"

Laxman laughed, "Don't worry about that. Babuji knows a *shagird* has to stay with his *Ustad*. And he would love to have a singer for a son..."

Tansen got up and walked with the boys to the door. "I have to do my *riyaz* now and you two have a long ride back to Agra. Drive carefully and try to reach home before dark. The road gets very deserted."

Kesho came and handed Laxman a small bundle and said, "There's some food to eat on the way. Some paranthas and vegetables." The boys grinned at each other, first sherbet, now paranthas! Their day was really going well.

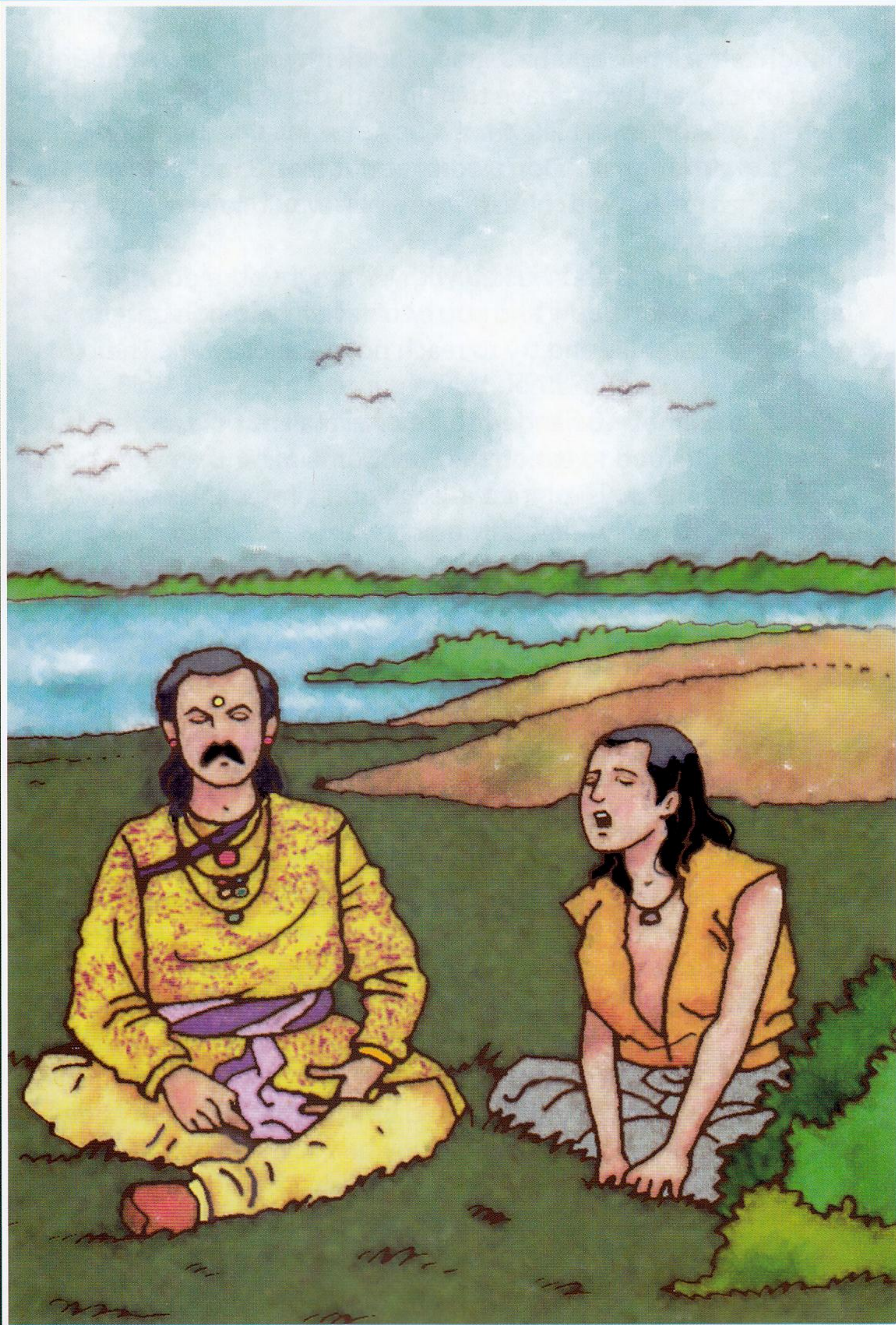
"Come back in a day or two," Tansen said to Bishnu, "Say goodbye to your family. You may not see them for some time," and he waved them out of the room. As they walked out, Bishnu took a backward glance at the man to whom he had just given all his life. Tansen was back to tuning his *tanpura*.

His heart singing, Bishnu followed Kesho and Laxman back the way they had come to the gate of the palaces. Emperor Akbar lives here, he thought wonderingly, and I'm going to live here too. Also Prince Salim, Prince Murad and Prince Daniyal. The singer Baz Bahadur is here too. And the famous courtier Birbal.

Driving back, munching on the delicious paranthas, Laxman looked at the dreamy face of his brother and smiled, "Do you know how lucky you are to actually live in Fatehpur Sikri and learn music from Mian Tansen?"

"I am lucky, aren't I," Bishnu exclaimed. "I'll finally hear Mian Tansen sing. Every day!"





Chapter Three

THE FIRST SARGAM

A couple of days later, at the gates of Fatehpur Sikri, Laxman gathered his brother into his arms and hugged him tight.

"Take care of yourself. Listen to your *Ustadji* and don't ask too many questions," he said, looking down into Bishnu's scared and excited face and then added reassuringly, "He is a good man, Bishnu, you'll be fine. Every Tuesday in the afternoon, I'll come and wait for you at the gate here. Take permission from your *Ustadji* and come and see me."

Bishnu, gulping to hold back his tears, nodded mutely. Then, picking up his small bundle, he walked into the palace. Laxman stood there long after the brave little figure of his brother had vanished behind the walls. Then, turning his cart around, he drove back slowly towards Agra. Bishnu was all alone now.

His first day at Fatehpur Sikri passed in a daze. Kesho met him and took him to a small room at the back of the house where in a corner, a charpai had been kept for him. He would share the room with Kesho.

Later, in the *baithak*, Tansen's sitting room, Bishnu met two students who were to learn with him. Both of them were about fourteen and older than him. They wore very expensive clothes. They ignored him, whispering to each other as Bishnu went and



shyly sat down beside them. Then Tansen came in and *riyaz*, the daily session of music lessons and practice began.

In the following days, Bishnu discovered more about his classmates. They were Shyam Singh and Basheer Khan, both sons of noblemen. They had shown talent for music and were made Tansen's *shagirds* but they were not planning to be singers. As part of their education, they also learnt sword fighting and horse riding. Tansen had other senior students, but as a beginner Bishnu was to sit and sing with Shyam and Basheer. And from the first day, they made it clear they did not like it one bit.

One morning in the *riyaz* room as they waited for Tansen, Shyam looked at Bishnu's simple cotton clothes and sneered, "Look at his clothes! What are they made of little peasant, sacking?"

Basheer laughed cruelly, "Why ask? He wouldn't know what silk is."

"I know what silk is," Bishnu stared back defiantly. "We wash silk clothes."

"Oh! Of course!" said Shyam. "I was forgetting. You wash clothes."

"What else can a dhobi do?" Bishnu asked crisply. "He can't fry pakoras."

Tansen entered and the boys quietened down. He picked up his *tanpura*, his fingers moving across the strings, filling the room with its sonorous droning sound. Then he began to sing the *sargam*, and Bishnu sang after him. He forgot his anger and no longer thought of the insults. He just let his mind and body drown in the music, as his voice rose in song. Nothing mattered, except the music.

Back at home in Agra, on cool summer dawns, lying on



the charpai on the terrace, he had heard the courtesan begin her *riyaz* with the same notes. His *Ustadji* had told him that they were called the *sargam* and all songs were based on these seven basic musical notes and now he learnt to sing them properly.

The hours flew by. All the while, Tansen was watching his three young *shagirds*. After a while, he could see that Shyam and Basheer were letting their minds wander. They would look out of the window and miss a note, move restlessly and lose the melody.

A little away from them sat Bishnu. Cross-legged, his body still and relaxed, his wide eyes fixed on Tansen, as if he was swallowing the notes that his *Ustad* was singing. He would sing them back exactly as Tansen had sung them. He rarely made a mistake. He had picked up in a few days what Shyam and Basheer took weeks to learn. Rarely, Bishnu would sing a note wrong and then he would give an angry shake of his head, close his eyes and sing again. He never repeated a mistake.

What have I found here? Tansen thought in silent wonder, by the banks of the Jamuna!

At lunch, Kesho and Bishnu would sit down to a simple meal of rotis, dal and vegetables. Kesho was Tansen's most trusted servant and he had asked Kesho to keep an eye on Bishnu. Putting another roti on Bishnu's brass plate, he asked the boy, "I've been giving you the food I eat. But if you want, you can have the food the other students eat."

"What do they eat?"

"Oh rich dishes full of ghee and dry fruits, meat and eggs. Pulao, kabab, biryani, that sort of thing. That food comes from the palace kitchen."



Bishnu chewed his roti thoughtfully for a while and then asked, "What does *Ustadji* eat?"

"This roti, dal and vegetables. I've always cooked for him. He doesn't like rich food."

"I'll eat what *Ustadji* eats."

Kesho looked pleased, "Good! Once in a while you can taste the special palace food too."

In the evenings, all the other students would go home. Except for Bishnu. Shyam and Basheer's family lived in Agra so they had separate rooms in the palace with their own servants. Their evenings were busy with horse riding and kite flying. Or going out to Fatehpur Sikri's glittering market to stroll about in their best clothes, taking the evening air.

Every morning, Bishnu was learning to read and write from Kesho, at Tansen's orders. His *Ustadji* said good singers also wrote their own songs. But in the evenings, once the music lessons were over, Bishnu had nothing to do.

There was no one to talk to as Kesho would be busy in the kitchen. For a few days, Bishnu wandered about looking at the wonderful sights of Fatehpur Sikri. The beautiful palaces with red sandstone pillars, carved with flowers and leaves. He peered into rooms and admired the gorgeous carpets and furniture. He wandered around, dazzled by the expensively dressed people everywhere.

One evening, he felt very alone. No one really noticed him as everyone was so busy in Fatehpur Sikri. At home in Agra, at this time of the day, he would be back from the riverbank and out in the streets, playing with his friends. He missed those marbles and *gilli-danda* games, playing hide and seek among the trees, the feel of the dusty street under his feet as they ran about. He wished there could be another music *riyaz* he could join. Or that Kesho would call him into the kitchen.



"Bishnu?" He turned to see Tansen standing at the door of the *baithak*. Bishnu went up to him and said, "*Ustadji*, do you know how to play marbles?"

Tansen laughed, "I did once when I was your age. But that was years ago. Why? You want to play with me?"

"Nnno..." Bishnu suddenly realised that he shouldn't really be talking of marbles with Tansen. You were supposed to be respectful and obedient before your *Ustadji*, his brother Laxman had said so.

As if sensing how lost Bishnu was feeling, Tansen put an arm across his shoulders and propelled him inside. "Bishnu, could you help me?" he pointed to all the musical instruments lying on the carpet - *tanpuras*, *tablas*, a *dholak* and a *sarangi*. "Would you dust them for me every evening?"

With a happy nod, Bishnu settled down to his new job and within minutes he had forgotten Laxman's advice about being quiet and respectful. "*Ustadji*?" he asked thoughtfully, busy polishing a *tanpura*.

Tansen did not look up from tightening the bindings across a *tabla*, he was tapping with a small hammer, "Hmm...?"

"Who was your *Ustadji*?"

"My *Ustad* was one of the greatest gurus of all times," and Tansen touched his right ear with his hand, "Swami Haridas of Vrindavan."

"Why did you do that?" Bishnu asked curiously.

Tansen looked up, "What?"

"Touch your ear. I saw Shyam do the same this morning."

"You do it when you say the name of your guru or *Ustad*. It is a gesture of respect."

His eyes sparkling with laughter, Bishnu said, "Mian Tansen!" and reached up to touch his right ear.



Tansen laughed, tapping Bishnu on the head affectionately, "You are a little monkey, my dhobi singer!"

Bishnu was, of course, not through with asking questions. As he dusted a *sarangi*, he asked, "So you grew up in Vrindavan *Ustadji*, not Agra?"

"No. I was born in a village called Behat and when Swami Haridas heard me sing, he made me his *shagird*." There was a faraway look in Tansen's eyes, "I was just like you, staying at Swamiji's ashram and learning music all day. It was a good life for a poor village boy called Ramtanu."

"Ramtanu? Your name is Tansen!"

Tansen laughed, "No, that is a title given to me by the Raja of Rewa. I used to be his royal singer and he gave me that title, it means I am a master of music. I was born Ramtanu, though no one calls me that anymore."

Then Bishnu began to help Kesho in the kitchen and his evenings became busy. "Kesho *Bhai*," Bishnu said a couple of weeks later, "What does Emperor Akbar look like?"

"He looks like a great king. The ruler of a great empire, who has now built this magnificent capital city of Fatehpur Sikri," Kesho said loyally.

Bishnu chopped vegetables thoughtfully for a while, "But why did he build Fatehpur Sikri? He had perfectly good palaces in the Agra fort."

"That is a fascinating story," with a hiss and a sputter Kesho dropped the *masala* into the hot pan on the earthen chulha, filling the kitchen with delicious smells. "Akbar Badshah had conquered many kingdoms, he was the most powerful king in the land, but still he was a very sad man."

"Why?"

"He had no children. What was the point of building a great empire if there was no son to follow you to the throne? He



prayed at many holy places, even walked all the way to Ajmer to pray at the shrine there. Then he heard of a Sufi saint called Sheikh Salim Chishti, who lived on a hilltop in a village called Sikri. So the Emperor came to meet this saint. And Sheikh Sahib told Akbar that he will have not one, but three sons!"

"And it came true!"

"Of course. So when the Emperor decided he needed a new and larger capital city, he chose to build it in Sikri, in gratitude to the saint. You can see the *dargah* of the saint beside the Buland Darwaza, it is a beautiful marble building. And as Akbar Badshah had just conquered the kingdom of Gujarat, to celebrate that victory he called the new city Fatehpur Sikri, the city of victory."

"Will I ever see him?" Bishnu wondered wistfully. "Fatehpur Sikri is so big, I get lost here. And I can't go near the royal palaces either."

"You'll see him when you sing before him."

"Me! Sing for the Emperor?" Bishnu's eyes widened in astonishment, "You must be joking!"

"One day you will. Whenever he sings before the Emperor, Mian Tansen takes his students with him. You will sit with them and the senior-most and best students sit with him on the stage and sing with him. That's his way of introducing his students to the Emperor and all the nobles."

"Oh! Do you think I'll sing with *Ustadji* one day?"

Kesho looked at the flushed and dreamy face before him and smiled to himself. He had heard Tansen talking to his friends about Bishnu. He had described Bishnu as his most precious *shagird*, the most talented student he had ever had.

"And when you sing before the Emperor, the Navaratnas – the nine jewels of the royal court – will be there to listen to you."

"Nine jewels?"



"Nine of the most talented men in the land. Among them there is Faizi, the poet, and his brother Abul Fazl, who is writing a history of the reign of Akbar. Then there is Raja Man Singh, the great warrior and statesman. And Abdur Rahim Khankhana, the scholar. Raja Todar Mal, the emperor's trusted prime minister. And last but not the least, Raja Birbal, who is not just his adviser but also a dear friend."

"Birbal! I've heard of him. He is a very clever man. They tell stories about how he can fool anybody. They talk about him on the streets of Agra. I would really like to meet him."

"You will. You will meet them all," Kesho said with total certainty.

Early next morning, Tansen and his three *shagirds* were at their *riyaz*. Shyam and Basheer had been up late the night before, watching a magic show. Now they sat sleepily before Tansen, singing flat and out of tune. After a few irritated glances that had no effect on the two sleepy boys, Tansen looked at their bored faces and said, "If you two don't want to learn music, then say so. I'd rather teach Bishnu. He is always serious about his *riyaz*."

Basheer glared at Bishnu and said, "Hah! The dhobi singer! You let him sit right next to us, I don't like learning with him."

"Neither do I," Shyam joined in. "We are of noble blood, he's a dhobi. He shouldn't be treated as our equal."

Tansen's face flushed, his eyes flashed with anger and he said, "Is that what you two feel? Do you know that I am not of noble blood either and Bishnu may be a poor man's son, but he has more talent than the two of you put together and he works much harder too. You should learn from a boy so much younger than you."

A little scared at Tansen's sudden anger, the boys stayed silent as Tansen's voice turned sharp with anger, "I suggest both



of you go back to your rooms now. You are in no state to sing. Tomorrow when you come, you will remember to apologize to Bishnu and behave properly like the noblemen you think you are."

Faces sullen, the two boys got up and left the room. Tansen turned to Bishnu and said briskly, "Sing!" Bishnu closed his eyes and let the music take over.





Chapter Four

BISHNU FINDS A FRIEND

One afternoon, after lunch, Bishnu had carried his little bundle of clothes to the edge of one of the large water tanks to wash. As always, he was humming what he had learnt that morning as he pounded away busily. "Ah! This work suits you better, dhobi boy," a sarcastic voice spoke behind him. Bishnu turned to see the looming figures of Shyam Singh and Basheer Khan standing at the edge of the water tank.

Bishnu stood up and looked at them squarely in the eye. Shyam lowered a threatening face and said roughly, "Why don't you stay away from singing?" he hissed, "Unless you'd like to get a few broken bones, dhobi boy."

"Because of you, *Ustadji* was angry with us," Shyam added angrily.

Bishnu felt his heart thud with fear. What were they going to do, he wondered. They could hurt me, he realized, worried. They are bigger and stronger and there were two of them. He bundled up his wet clothes and stood up. Suddenly Basheer clutched his arm so hard it hurt, and Shyam caught a handful of his hair, pulling it painfully, "Go back to where you belong. Or we'll really make you regret it!"

'I have to get away,' Bishnu thought desperately. He felt the wet kurta in his hand. Gripping it hard, he reached out and slashed at them with it. The cloth slapped across their faces



with a wet 'Whip!' and a 'Splash!' Surprised at the sudden attack, Shyam let go of Bishnu's arm and in a second, he was streaking away as fast as his thin legs could carry him. Basheer tried to chase him, but he stepped into a puddle and slipped to land in the mud with a thud.

Turning the corner, Bishnu glanced back and saw them standing there, faces dripping with water and their fancy clothes all wet and muddy. By the time they had recovered enough to chase Bishnu again, he was far away.

A couple of hours later, Bishnu sat up a tree, on a high branch, sniffing sadly. He felt safe there because Shyam and Basheer could still be searching for him. Bishnu was feeling very lonely in the huge busy city - alone and afraid. He didn't want to complain to Tansen but he wished his brother Laxman was with him. Bishnu was not very good at fighting and Laxman, who had always protected his kid brother from the bullies on their street, would have known what to do. Wiping his tears Bishnu sniffed again.

"Tears? Are those tears I see in a monkey's eyes?" an amused voice spoke right below Bishnu. "Come down, *beta*."

Startled, Bishnu looked down. A man stood under the tree, smiling up at him. Bishnu slithered down to the ground and looked up at a kind, amused face topped with a large turban. A pair of large eyes twinkled above a sharp nose and droopy moustache.

"This place is dangerous, so I was hiding up there," Bishnu said shortly, his voice quavering a little, "or they'll hit me again." and he pointed to the bruise on his arm where Shyam had clutched him.

The man stopped smiling. He sat down in the shade of the tree and pulled Bishnu's hand to make him sit beside him. "No one should be afraid in the city of Akbar. Tell me what happened, *beta*."

There was something in the quiet voice that made Bishnu



pour out his woes to the man. He told him everything that had happened at the water tank.

"Ah!" the man's eyes brightened, "You are Tansen's dhobi singer! He spoke about you." The man ruffled Bishnu's hair after listening to the breathlessly told tale. "This problem does need the attention of a man like me. It is serious indeed."

"Who are you? Can you teach me to fight?"

"This problem, Bishnu, needs cleverness; not muscles. Brains are always better and for that you have come to the right man," he grinned and tapped his chest, "Me! Birbal!"

"Raja Birbal!" Bishnu smiled in delight, "Kesho *Bhai* said you were a Navaratna."

"Well your *Ustadji* probably forgot to mention it, but he is one of the jewels of Emperor Akbar's court too." Birbal got up. "Let's go for a walk while we do some thinking."

"Every one says you are pretty good at thinking."

Birbal laughed, "I try, dhobi singer."

Birbal and Bishnu strolled along in the garden, as Birbal thought of a plan to face the threat of Shyam and Basheer. Bishnu had no doubt at all that he would come up with a clever idea. After all, wasn't he one of the cleverest men in the kingdom?

They walked past the row of rooms where the royal soldiers stayed, then strolled before the stables full of stamping horses. Bishnu still could not get over how big Fatehpur Sikri was. You could always discover new places to see every day.

By then, they had reached a large open space where a bunch of boys of about Bishnu's age were playing in a big, noisy huddle. Birbal waved at them and a few of the boys came running. "*Huzoor?*" the oldest boy bowed. Bishnu guessed they were the children of the people who worked at the palaces and they had recognized Birbal.



"Boys, meet Bishnu, he is Mian Tansen's youngest *shagird* and is new to Fatehpur Sikri," Birbal said. "He has no friends here, how about letting him play with you?"

"Of course!" the boys grinned. "We play here every evening. You can come too."

"What are you good at?" another boy asked eagerly.

"Marbles!" Bishnu grinned happily. Then his face clouded as he turned anxiously to Birbal, "But what about the problem *huzoor*? Shyam and Basheer could try something else tomorrow. I can't waste my time on marbles, can I?"

"You can," said Birbal firmly. "Tomorrow morning, I'll come to your *riyaz* with a solution. This is a serious matter that needs a lot of thought. I'll have to worry over it all night. But I'm sure I can solve it." His face was solemn but his eyes danced with laughter. Then he pushed Bishnu forward, "Go and play! I promise Bishnu, those two boys won't bother you again."

In a flash, Bishnu had run off and became a part of the dusty bunch of boys gambolling about with yells of laughter. His heart sang. He had friends again!

Next morning, Bishnu was in the *riyaz* room well before the others. He stood anxiously at the door, thinking worriedly, 'I'm sure Birbal's forgotten. Where is he? He promised he'd be here!' Bishnu paced about for a moment and then came to a halt at the door again.

He straightened up as a man turned the corner and came strolling towards Tansen's house. Bishnu streaked down the road to him and asked breathlessly, "You have a plan?"

"Of course!" Birbal looked down into the small anxious face turned up so trustingly. "Now listen carefully. Do exactly as I tell you. I'm going to come in a bit later once your *riyaz* has started. Then when I say anything, all you have to do is agree with me. Even if what I say sounds crazy, don't look surprised."

"Ji," Bishnu nodded, though he was feeling quite puzzled.

"Now what's your brother's name?" Birbal asked.



"Laxman," Bishnu replied, even more puzzled. "Why?"

"Because we are going to talk about him."

"But how can you? You've never met him."

"True. But I'm going to use my imagination instead to guess everything."

"And that will solve my problem?"

"It will. Trust me. Just remember, nod at everything and don't look surprised," and with a reassuring pat on Bishnu's shoulder, Birbal vanished into one of the nearby houses.

The *riyaz* was well on its way. Sitting before Tansen, Bishnu wasn't feeling too worried because he knew that before their teacher, Shyam and Basheer would be at their best behaviour. They were much too scared of the singer to try anything. As usual, they sat a little away from Bishnu, pointedly ignoring him.

After a few moments, Bishnu forgot all about them because today Tansen had begun teaching them their first *raag*. And Bishnu's heart leapt in delight at the lovely melody and the beautiful words. They were learning to sing *Raag Yaman*. First Tansen sang out the words of the *bandish* – the four lines that used the notes of the *raag*. Then he taught them the exact way in which the notes had to be sung to create the basic tune of the *raag*.

After a few attempts, Bishnu was singing the melody in perfect imitation of his *Ustad*. Just like when he listened to the courtesan's practice at home, the words were still not too clear, but the tune was already Bishnu's very own. He listened in surprise to the other two boys struggling to remember the exact mix of notes. For Bishnu, it was as easy as breathing!

Immersed in his singing, Bishnu hadn't noticed when Birbal had come in, to sit down quietly at the back of the room to listen. It was only when the *riyaz* was over and the boys were



getting their breaths back, that his voice spoke cheerfully from behind them.

"You sing well, Bishnu. You do come from a really talented family."

Remembering Birbal's instructions, though not understanding at all, Bishnu nodded solemnly.

Tansen looked curiously at Bishnu, "Your brother sings too? You never told me that."

Bishnu gulped. Help! He thought in panic, what do I say now? But before Bishnu could struggle to find an answer to that impossible question, Birbal came up to sit beside Tansen, "No, Laxman is a famous wrestler. Didn't you know?"

Tansen looked even more puzzled, glancing at Birbal with a frown and then, spotting the tense expression on his youngest student's face, he said nothing more. Bishnu swallowed and added recklessly, "Laxman *Bhai* is the best wrestler in the city of Agra."

"He is the strongest man I have ever seen," Birbal was continuing blithely, "Tall, great big muscles and a grip that can crush bones." Bishnu, remembering Laxman's tall, thin frame and very ordinary muscles, swallowed again. "He could pick you up, Basheer, with one hand." Birbal was smiling down at Basheer, who looked a bit nervous now. "I've heard he once wrestled bare-handed with a wild boar and won."

"And he's also really bad tempered," Bishnu had now understood Birbal's plan and joined in with enthusiasm. "Once when a bully was refusing to pay my father for some washing, Laxman got so mad he broke the man's arm and shoved his head inside a water pot!" he ended with great relish. "That's enough! Shut up!" muttered Birbal from the side of his mouth, stopping Bishnu before he turned his brother into a giant killer.

Shyam and Basheer were looking a bit green. All the while Tansen had been listening quietly to this fantastic conversation. Bishnu glanced a little nervously at him, suddenly remembering



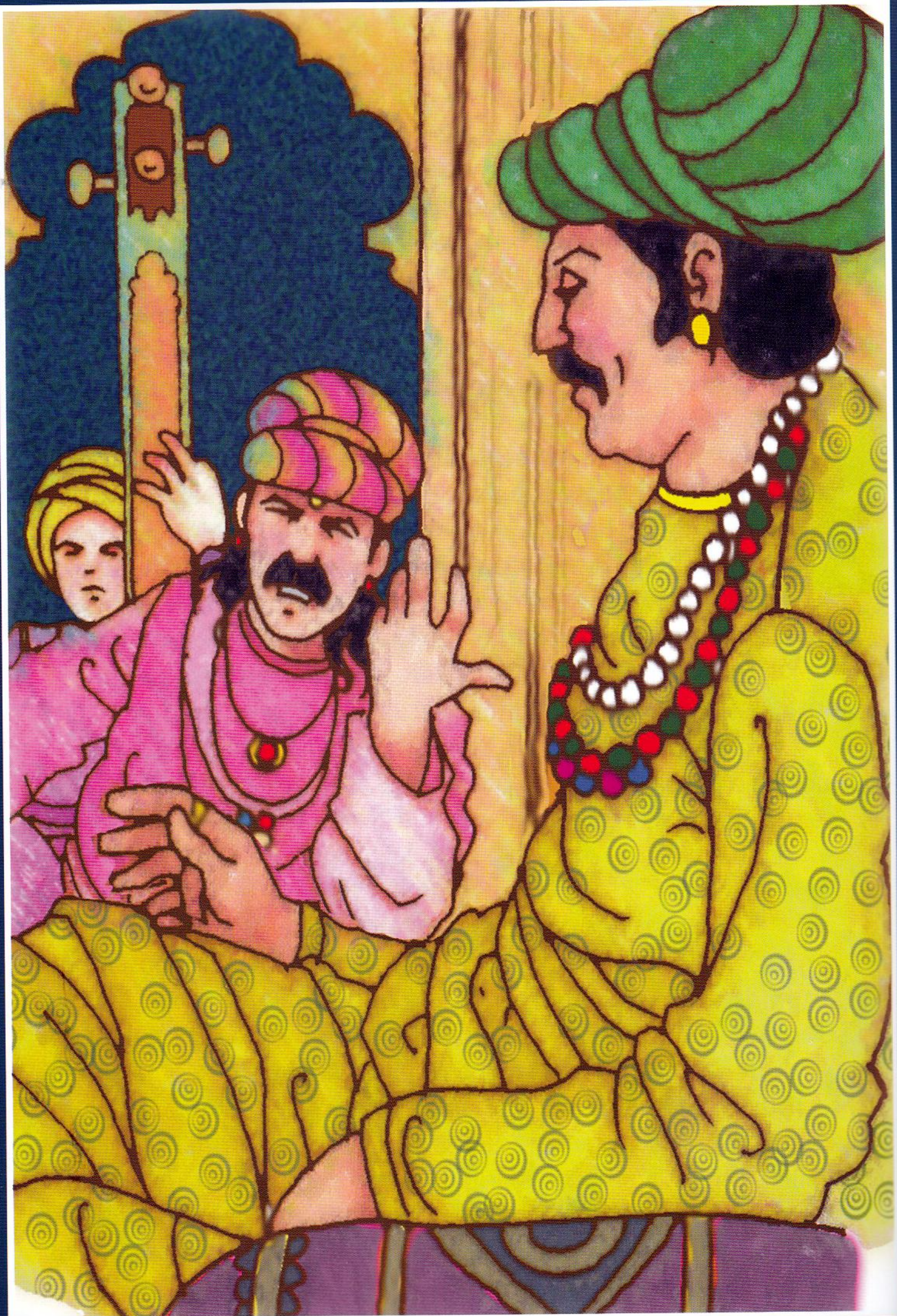
that he had seen the real Laxman. Tansen sat, head bent and Bishnu thought he saw Tansen's shoulders shake a couple of times. But he could be mistaken. However when he raised his face, Tansen looked a bit flushed but very solemn. He and Birbal exchanged a quick glance and their mouths curved in smiles.

Birbal got up and while going past Bishnu, he patted him on his head and said, "You know my house, Bishnu. Come whenever you want. I'll tell my cook to keep some laddoos for you. Also, I'd like to hear the dhobi-song that you sang for your *Ustadji* by the banks of the Jamuna. Remember, now you have a Navaratna for a friend!"

"*Ji Huzoor!*" exclaimed Bishnu in delight, springing up to accompany Birbal to the door. Then he bowed deeply in gratitude as Birbal left.

Coming back, Bishnu took a quick glance at the nervous faces of his two tormentors. It looked like they would leave him alone from then on. Birbal really was the cleverest man in the kingdom, Bishnu grinned to himself. What an absolutely fantastic way to solve his problem!





Chapter Five

SINGING FOR AKBAR

One morning, while dusting the *riyaz* room, Bishnu was counting the months. He had become a *shagird* of Mian Tansen in early winter and now the rains were just over. Nine months! The days had just flown by.

Earlier in Agra, the time would have passed helping with the washing by the river and playing with his friends in the street. Instead, here at Fatehpur Sikri, he had learnt so much. Not just the music and learning to read and write, but also about how to behave with people and how to live in the style of the nobility. And best of all, he had learnt to read and write and one day he was going to write his own songs, just like his *Ustadji*. Nowadays Laxman did not come that often to see him. But Bishnu did not feel so homesick because once a month, he had been allowed to go to Agra to stay with his family for a few days.

Usually Bishnu would hop on to the many carts that ferried things between Fatehpur Sikri and Agra. Perching with the driver, in front of a pile of wheat sacks or vegetables, bundles of clothes or stacks of wood, he would reach Agra. Most of the drivers knew by now that he was Tansen's *shagird* and did not mind giving him a free ride. He did not know it, but people were talking about Tansen's little dhobi singer.



It was fun to go home to Agra and have the family make a big fuss over him. All his friends would listen wide-eyed to his stories of life in Fatehpur Sikri. At home, Bishnu felt quite a hero, especially when he told them about how Birbal and he had scared Shyam and Basheer into behaving themselves. Hearing it, Laxman laughed so much there were tears in his eyes.

Best of all, Mian Tansen was giving him a small allowance for helping Kesho with the housework. And with it, he and Laxman bought some bright kurta-pyjamas from Kinari Bazar. And now he was saving the money to buy his mother a good sari. Life was just great!

After the morning *riyaz*, Tansen told his three students to be ready in the evening. He was going to sing at the Queen's palace and all his students were to go with him. Bishnu's face brightened, finally he would listen to his *Ustadji* in a concert and he could wear his new kurta-pyjama too!

In the evening, following Tansen, Bishnu and the other students entered the inner complex of the royal palaces. Tansen came to a stop in a huge sandstone courtyard, as he pointed out the various palaces around it.

"That's the Diwan-i-Am," he said pointing to a low, long building with arches, "That's where the Emperor meets the public and listens to their problems." Then he gestured to a square palace with a balcony, "The Diwan-i-Khas is where he meets his ministers and courtiers. All the money is collected in the treasury, there in the corner," and he pointed to a small pavilion with carved pillars, "that's where the Prime Minister, Raja Todar Mal sits."

"What's that, *Ustadji*?" Bishnu asked, pointing to a very unusual building. It looked like five layers of open verandahs with pillars, one above the other like a mountain peak.



"That's the Panch Mahal, where the Emperor sits to enjoy the cool breezes. See that?" Tansen pointed to some white stone squares set in the courtyard floor creating a huge board for a game of *Pachisi*, "Real maid servants stand on those squares as the pieces of the game. The Emperor and his courtiers sit in the Panch Mahal and play with them."

"*Kya baat!*" murmured Bishnu, "A house just to play games and smell the breezes. It must be fun to be an Emperor."

"It is also a lot of hard work," Tansen said severely, "The Badshah works all day and he often has to go on military expeditions. Running an empire is no joke."

Tansen was to sing in the palace of Queen Jodh Bai. They sat in the inner courtyard, surrounded by rooms where the women of the royal harem – queens and princesses – sat behind *chik* curtains. The floor was covered with thick silk and wool carpets. Large bolsters were set on top and the audience sat leaning back against them. Maids stood behind them, waving large fans. Incense smoked in large brass bowls perfuming the air and flower garlands swayed over the arches of the doors. Tansen's students sat in one corner, with Bishnu among them.

Everyone was waiting for the Emperor. Bishnu looked at the courtiers. They wore silk *angarkhas*, long kurtas with buttons on the left and loose pyjamas in gorgeous hues, embroidered in gold. Their turbans were set with jewels and their rings, necklaces and earrings glittered by the light of the tall oil lamps. Among them, Bishnu spotted Raja Birbal busy talking to the people around him. Raja Sahib likes talking, thought Bishnu, just like me.

Bishnu looked often towards the door, wondering when the Emperor would arrive. He was feeling very excited, not only



was it his first concert, but he would also see Badshah Akbar. When he told all this to his friends at home, they would be amazed! Finally, he would see the most powerful man in the kingdom. Bishnu couldn't wait.

Then he heard the sound of drums and then a loud announcement that the king was coming. As Emperor Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar entered the palace, everyone stood up and bowed deeply. 'Yes,' thought Bishnu, looking at the king closely, 'Kesho was right, he does look like a great king.'

The Emperor wasn't very tall and had a wheatish complexion. He was a middle-aged man now and it showed in his greying hair and drooping moustache. The firm lips and large eyes showed great intelligence and power and then Bishnu noticed that he had a small mole above his lips. Bishnu had heard that he was a famous warrior and he looked at the broad shoulders and thought his king must be a great swordsman.

Akbar was dressed simply in a white *angarkha* and pyjamas, with a thick row of pearls around his neck. Small diamond earrings glittered in his ears and there were rings on his fingers. Compared to him, the brightly dressed courtiers looked like peacocks showing off their finery. He seemed to be in a good mood, as he looked around the glittering gathering with a smile and then he bustled up to his seat, sat down, leaned back against a bolster and waved a hand at Tansen, "Let the concert begin, *Ustadji!*"

Tansen sat in the middle of the gathering with the musicians. His two senior-most students, who were playing the *tanpuras*, sat on his two sides. The man playing the *pakhawaj* drum and the *tabla* player sat on one side, the *sarangi* player on



the other. As the gathering of people fell silent, he closed his eyes, took a deep breath and began to sing. It was a *raag* he was famous for singing. In the cool cloudy evening, the breeze still smelling of the wet earth and rains, he began with the majestic *Raag Malhar*, the *raag* of the monsoons.

As the deep sonorous voice rose and echoed across the still courtyard in the slow leisurely *alaap*, Bishnu felt his skin tingle with excitement as he instantly recognized the melody. 'That's the tune I sang to him the first day!' he thought, 'by the river bank and *Ustadji* said it was his favourite *raag*.' As the deep mellow voice wove an intricate melody, the *tanpuras* droned and the drummers kept the beat. Within moments, Bishnu had forgotten everything except the music and he swayed in happiness, 'this is music magic' he thought 'and my *Ustadji* is a true magician'.

After the *dhrupad*, Mian Tansen sang a couple of light *thumris*, full of intricate melodies and pretty lyrics that made everyone sway with delight. Emperor Akbar's voice joined the chorus of voices exclaiming "*Wah! Wah!*" in praise, making Bishnu's heart swell with pride.

After the last notes of the *thumri* faded in the air, Akbar beckoned to Tansen and the singer went up to him and bowed. Akbar took off the double string of pearls he was wearing and put it around Tansen's neck, "You excelled tonight, Mian Tansen."

Just then a maid came from behind one of the *chik* curtains and approached the Emperor. Bowing low, she whispered something to Akbar and he nodded. "I have a request from the Queen, *Ustadji*."

"Anything, Your Highness." Tansen bowed.



"A month from now Queen Jodh Bai is going to celebrate Diwali. That night she invites you to sing at the Anup Talao, at a special festival concert."

"*Ji Huzoor*. I will be deeply honoured."

"And wear those pearls," Akbar smiled. "You look very handsome wearing them."

Tansen smiled back, his eyes full of pride and delight.

Next evening, Bishnu was again at work, cleaning the *riyaz* room. And as always he was bombarding Tansen with questions that were being answered with remarkable patience. "*Ustadji...*" began Bishnu, busy polishing a lamp, "there is something I don't understand. Our Emperor is a Muslim. Then how can he celebrate a Hindu festival like Diwali in the palace?"

"Queen Jodh Bai is a Rajput Hindu."

"You mean she did not have to become a Muslim when she married the Emperor?"

"No. The Emperor has a Hindu and even a Christian queen. They are all allowed to practise their own religion."

"So Prince Salim, Queen Jodh Bai's son, is actually half Hindu?"

"Correct. For the Emperor, all religions are good. Some of his leading courtiers and ministers like Raja Man Singh and Raja Todar Mal are Hindus too."

"And Raja Birbal," Bishnu added.

"The Emperor meets the preachers of every religion in the Ibadat-Khana, his palace for discussions."

"What about the poor castes? I'm a dhobi."

"It has never mattered to Akbar. Only your talent is important to him. Do you know, he personally discovered Daswant, one of our most talented miniature painters, and



Daswant is the son of a poor *palki* bearer. If you work hard, one day you can sing for him."

"He'll let a dhobi's son sing for him?"

Tansen nodded. "I like the Emperor. I really do," Bishnu said thoughtfully, while busy brushing the carpet.

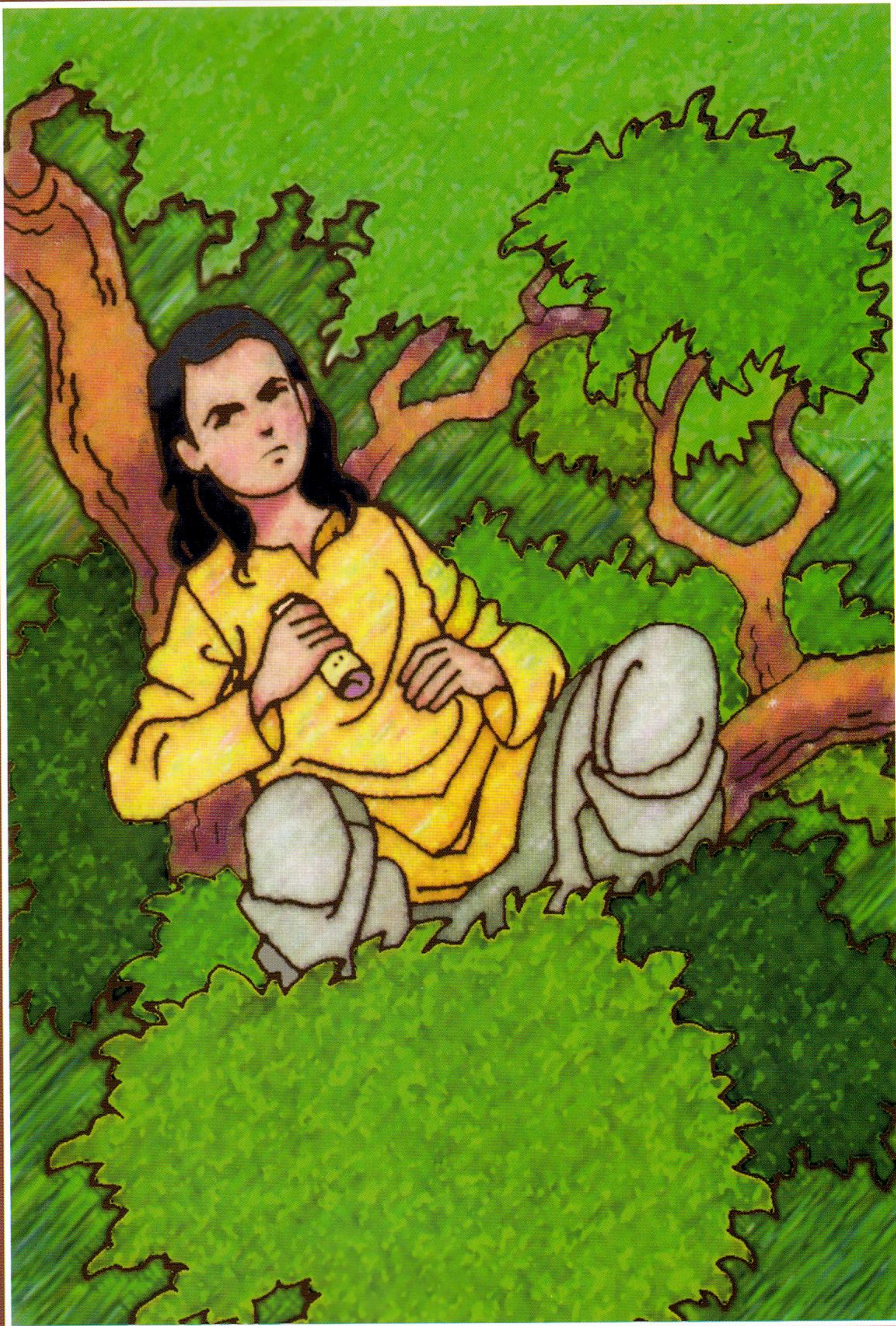
"He'll be very grateful to hear that."

Bishnu grinned companionably at the ironic reply, took a deep breath and began again, "*Ustadji* about..."

"Oh Bishnu!" Tansen sighed. "Enough questions for one day. Do you never stop chattering?"

"I do. When I sing," said Bishnu, vigorously dusting the shelves. Tansen sighed.





Chapter Six

THE PEARL NECKLACE

Time flew for Bishnu and every month was like a musical note for him. In the hot summer month of *Ashara*, Bishnu began to learn his first *raag*, *Raag Yaman*. In *Shravan*, when the rains washed away the dust, he sang it to the beat of raindrops and he did it so well that Tansen called Birbal to listen to him. Then Bishnu picked up a *thumri* based on *Raag Yaman*. Tansen then began teaching him the deeper intricacies of the *raag* as the cool rainy breezes of *Bhadra* welcomed the beautiful sunny days of *Ashvin*.

Bishnu's days were like a crystal clear melody. Everything came with a song. He dreamed of music, hummed it as he did the housework, tapping a beat with the broom as he swept the rooms, or the knife as he cut vegetables in the kitchen. He sang full-throated by the water tank as he washed his and Tansen's clothes, doodled around a tune as he rode back to Agra in the horse cart with Laxman for a holiday. And all the time, he bombarded Tansen and Birbal with questions. Birbal had given him a new name. He called him Bishnu, the *dhobi-kotwal*, because he asked questions just like a policeman.

As autumn cooled the air, Mian Tansen became very busy preparing for his big Diwali concert. The members of the royal family, the queens, princesses and princes and all the important noblemen would be there, so this was the one show that had



to go absolutely perfectly. So, Tansen was doing a lot of *riyaz*. Every morning, at the crack of dawn, Bishnu would wake to the sound of Tansen's singing. He would creep quietly out of bed, careful not to disturb Kesho and go and sit in a dark corner of the *riyaz* room to listen. Tansen would nod to him and go on singing.

This was the best part of his day. Bishnu would sit still, his mind concentrated on the man singing before him, as he tried to catch every nuance of the singing. How Tansen moved the *raag* from the slow *alaap* to the faster beat. How he would take the *raag* into newer melodies and then curve it back again to the original musical notes of the *raag*. And all the while, he would be amazed at what Tansen could do with his voice, effortlessly moving from one movement to another in a waterfall of notes, playing his voice like a musical instrument.

One morning, Tansen sang for a while then turned to his audience of one and asked, "What do you think? It was *Malkauns*."

Bishnu took a deep breath and said, "It began sadly but ended happily." He gave a gusty sigh. "That bit at the end, it is so hard to sing. How do you do it?"

Tansen smiled, "I let my heart sing." Then he pointed to the second *tanpura* beside him and said, "As you are here every morning, will you play the *tanpura* for me?"

"Yes!" Bishnu's eyes glittered with happiness and he went up to sit below Tansen's seat, picked up the *tanpura* and prepared to play for his *Ustadji*. Tansen was very fussy about who played with him and this was the first time Bishnu had been asked to do so.

So every morning, Bishnu sat beside Tansen, his fingers moving across the *tanpura* strings, listening to the song of Tansen's heart. And at the end of every session he would think, 'one day I have to sing like that'.



The day before Diwali, Tansen said to Kesho, "Keep my clothes ready for the concert. I want to wear the green and gold *angarkha*, the new silk turban and the pearl necklace the Emperor presented to me at the last concert. He had asked me to wear it at Diwali."

Kesho and Bishnu went into Tansen's bedroom to lay out Tansen's special concert clothes, brushing and smoothening out the *angarkhas* and pyjamas, polishing the shoes, repairing the buttons. Then Kesho took the locked box of jewels to Tansen and said, "If you select all the jewellery now, I'll clean and polish the pieces."

From a pile of bracelets, necklaces and earrings, Tansen first selected a *sarpech* – it was a leaf-shaped brooch set with a large emerald and pearls that he would fix on his turban. Then he picked out small earrings set with pearls and three rings glittering with precious stones. Then his hands stilled over the box, "Kesho, where are the pearls? The ones the Badshah gave me last time? They are not here."

Kesho looked worried, "The necklace? Isn't it in the box? How can that be? You never forget to put your jewels away." In a moment, box had been upturned on the carpet and as Bishnu stood and watched anxiously, Kesho and Tansen checked through the jewellery.

In growing panic, Kesho pulled out a second box in which Tansen kept the jewellery he wore everyday. Then he and Bishnu went into Tansen's bedroom and opened the large wooden chest in which all his clothes were kept.

One by one, they threw out all the clothes in the chest. Kurtas, pyjamas, *angarkhas*, shawls, flew out to lie in a pile on the carpet until the chest was empty. Tansen, Kesho and Bishnu stood looking at each other. The pearl necklace given by Emperor Akbar was nowhere to be found.

Kesho turned to Bishnu, "Think hard, do you remember a



pearl necklace lying anywhere? You do all the dusting in the rooms."

Bishnu shook his head. "I never saw it after the concert."

Tansen's face was creased with worry. "If the Emperor remembers his request and notices I'm not wearing the pearls, he'll never forgive me."

"He never forgets anything!" Kesho nearly wailed in panic. "He is sure to notice that you are not wearing it."

"And he said it before everyone, so someone is sure to point out that I am not wearing it," Tansen said looking deeply worried and then he held his head in his hands. "Losing a royal gift, that is like a crime and I could be punished. They may even say I sold it for money. Oh Allah! What do I do? All my hard work would be in vain. I'll be finished as the royal singer. Just finished."

Bishnu gulped, he could not bear to hear the sadness in his *Ustadji's* voice. Losing the pearl necklace sounded like a serious matter. Then he and Kesho spent the whole morning searching every inch of the sitting room, the *baithak* and the *riyaz* room. Once again they went through Tansen's bedroom, checking every box and shelf and even the kitchen and the store were checked. The three of them were so worried that they hardly ate anything at lunch, trying to think of some place they may not have checked.

After lunch as Bishnu was going past Tansen's *baithak*, he heard Shyam and Basheer talking to him. "*Ustadji*, search Bishnu's things," Shyam was saying, "He is always dusting your room and I'm sure he has stolen the pearls."

Heart thudding, Bishnu stopped, frozen in fear.

"You allow him to go everywhere, touch everything. He even washes your clothes," Basheer added. "You shouldn't trust poor, low class peasants like Bishnu, *Ustadji*. They get tempted and they steal."



Bishnu's face flushed with anger, as he clenched his fists to stop himself from going in and punching the two boys. Of course, he thought, just because I'm poor, I'll be suspected of stealing. Then, he thought in panic, why doesn't *Ustadji* say something, does he suspect me too?

"We could call the palace guards, they could arrest him and put him in prison. He'll get so scared he'll return the pearls." Basheer added with a sneering laugh.

After what seemed like an endless pause to the listening Bishnu, Tansen spoke and he sounded very irritated, "Stop it, both of you! I know Bishnu and I would trust him with my life. I know he respects and loves me like a son. So don't say anymore and I don't like hearing such malicious words."

His heart singing, Bishnu marched into the *baithak*, went up to Tansen and bending, touched his feet.

"What was that for?" Tansen asked surprised.

For the first time, the talkative Bishnu had no words to say. Looking at his tear-filled eyes, Tansen understood and gently touched his tousled head gently and said, "Go and rest *beta*. You've been searching all morning. You must be very tired."

While leaving the room, Bishnu took a look at the scowling faces of Shyam and Basheer and gave a triumphant grin. Walking away, he thought, Shyam and Basheer may be talented but they will never make great singers. Bishnu remembered something Tansen had said to him once, to be a good artiste you have to be a good human being first.

Later in the afternoon, feeling restless and unhappy, Bishnu left the house and headed for the one place in Fatehpur Sikri where he could think in peace. Up on his favourite peepul tree. Sitting on a leafy branch, he munched on a rolled up parantha as he went carefully through everything that happened that evening at the royal concert, after Akbar had given the string of pearls to Tansen.



He remembered that by the time they came home, it was very late. So after the other students left, Kesho and he had heated the food and carried it into the *baithak* where Tansen sat waiting tiredly. In the kitchen, Kesho had muttered about how after concerts Tansen was always so tired that he hardly ate anything.

As they entered the room, Kesho was carrying the bowls of food on a tray and Bishnu was carrying the bowl of water and towel to wash his face, Tansen had smiled his thanks, reached up and taken off his turban...

"Turban!" yelled Bishnu, sitting up so suddenly he nearly fell off the tree, "Kesho *Bhai!* *Ustadji!* Turban!"

In a flash, Bishnu had slithered down the tree and streaking down the road had entered the house, yelling at the top of his voice. He came to a skidding halt before the chest of clothes in Tansen's bedroom. Above the chest, there was a long shelf in the wall on which were kept a row of Tansen's best turbans. He jumped up trying to reach the shelf, but he was too short to reach it and so began yelling again, "Kesho *Bhai!* *Ustadji!* *Jaldi ao!* Come quick!!"

All the noise had brought Kesho and Tansen hurrying into the room. "What's the matter?" Kesho asked. "Why are you yelling like this?"

"Quick *Ustadji!*" Bishnu was dancing with impatience, "Which turban were you wearing that evening when the Badshah gave you the pearls?"

"Why?" Tansen frowned.

"Because I remembered! You were sitting in the *baithak* and you were very tired. I brought the bowl of water and towel and you took off your turban before you washed your face. Then you took off your pearls and showed them to Kesho. And then you dropped them inside the turban! You sat down to eat..."



In an instant, Tansen had reached out to a red and gold silk turban on the shelf and as he pulled it towards him, the string of pearls fell out and before it could hit the ground, Bishnu had snatched it up and held it out with a triumphant grin, "The pearls!!"

Tansen and Kesho stood there smiling in relief. "Oh thank god! I'd even checked the rice bin and the *masala* box," Kesho said laughing. "And none of us thought of checking the turbans!"

"I couldn't, because I couldn't reach them." Bishnu pointed out.

"Right!" Kesho was still laughing. "It's all my fault!"

"It's no one's fault. We found it and that's all that matters." Tansen reached down to ruffle Bishnu's hair and said softly, "Thank you Bishnu."

And Bishnu replied in his mind, 'Thank you *Ustadji*, for trusting me.'





Chapter Seven

A DIWALI CELEBRATION

Finally, it was Diwali night. After sundown, the air was full of bursting crackers and the sky was lit by the silver light of bursting fireworks. This was his first Diwali at Fatehpur Sikri and Bishnu's heart was singing with happiness. Kesho had made a special Diwali lunch with hot puris, spicy *kachoris* with pickle and then there was halwa and lots of sweets. Then Tansen had given Bishnu a whole new, shining, silver rupee coin to spend anyway he liked. And best of all, his brother Laxman had come to spend the day with him and Tansen had allowed him to come to the concert too.

Laxman was to sit with Tansen's students and listen to the concert. He was so excited at getting the invitation that he did a small dance of delight around Bishnu and Kesho. Fortunately, Shyam and Basheer had gone home for the festival and so did not get a look at Bishnu's 'wrestler brother' and Bishnu was really thankful for that.

Now it was time to go for the concert. Kesho, Bishnu and Laxman were helping Tansen get ready. Laxman stood with the jewellery box and the *attar* perfume bottle. Bishnu held up a large mirror while Tansen put on the turban. Then Kesho stood on his toes and fixed the *sarpech* on it. Then Tansen took the pearl necklace from the jewellery box and put it around his neck and studied his reflection in the mirror.



"You look like a Badshah, *Ustadji*!" Bishnu said with pride making the others laugh. "It's true! I think *Ustadji* is even more handsome than Akbar Badshah!"

"Well, don't let anyone else hear that!" Kesho laughed, "or your *Ustadji* could get into trouble."

"You two are looking very grand too," Tansen commented, taking a close look at the bright new clothes that Laxman and Bishnu wore. "The kurtas look new."

"They cost two annas at the Kinari Bazaar." Laxman showed off the bright blue one that he wore. "See? The embroidery is special."

"And mine is made of pure mulmul. Muslin, straight from Bengal," Bishnu strutted.

"Well Bishnu, now that you are so well dressed in your Bengali mulmul, you can sit with me and play the *tanpura*."

"Me? On stage with you, *Ustadji*?" Bishnu asked, quite astonished.

"Why not? You've been playing for me every morning. Of course, you are not ready to sing with me. Shahid, my senior-most student, will be playing the other *tanpura* and accompanying me in the singing."

"But *Ustadji*..." Bishnu's face had an uncertain, oddly doubtful look.

"Now what's bothering you?" Tansen asked impatiently.

"*Ustadji*, I know that only your best students play for you at concerts. Why are you asking me? Is it because I found your pearl necklace?"

"No," replied Tansen quietly, "I am asking two of my best students to play for me."

His eyes shining with happiness, Bishnu dipped down and touched Tansen's feet. "Again?" Tansen laughed. "This is becoming a habit, dhobi singer. Once a week is quite enough!"



To Kesho and Laxman's amusement, Bishnu, who was never at a loss for words, had nothing to say. With a shy grin, he picked up a *tanpura* and got ready to follow Tansen.

Fatehpur Sikri was glittering like a jewel for Diwali. They walked past palaces where every window and balcony was decorated with glimmering earthen oil lamps. The Panch Mahal, Bishnu thought, looked like it had been garlanded in golden lights. Everywhere, people wearing their best clothes were wandering around happily, and maids were distributing sweets from large *thalis* piled high with ladoos and barfis.

The Anup Talao had been decorated to look like a fairyland. The Talao was a large, square, shallow pond in the middle of a big, red sandstone courtyard that was surrounded by palaces. In the middle of the pond was a square raised sandstone seat like an island, and this is where the singers sat when they sang for the king. They had to walk on narrow passageways built over the water to reach the seat. As Tansen and his musicians sat down to perform on this beautiful stage, Bishnu put down the *tanpura*, looked around nervously and felt his heart begin to thud.

Around them, the water was full of flowering water lilies and as dusk fell, maids floated lighted lamps on the water and it looked like the pool was filled with glowing golden flowers. Laxman, sitting in a corner with the other students, looked around and thought, 'this can't be real, am I in heaven or I must be dreaming.' He glanced towards the Anup Talao and at Bishnu's tiny figure and nervous little face as he sat beside Tansen and his heart swelling with pride, he thought, 'Bishnu doesn't even know how special he is. He is my little brother, the son of a poor dhobi and there he sits, beside the greatest singer in the kingdom and one day he may sing for the king'.

This was a very special concert and every nobleman and



courtier in Fatehpur Sikri had come to listen to Tansen. The courtyard facing the stage was laid out with carpets with bolsters and some of the audience sat there. One corner was covered by a screen, behind which the women of the palace – the queens and princesses – sat with their ladies-in-waiting. You could not see them but you could hear the soft hum of their voices. Bishnu knew that among them were three very important royal women, who were all great lovers of Tansen's singing. There was Queen Jodh Bai who had requested Tansen to sing and also another Queen Ruquayya Begum and the king's favourite aunt, Gulbadan Begum.

Tansen sat facing the three-storeyed palace called the Khwabgah – the Palace of Dreams. This was Akbar's personal palace, where he worked and slept. The Emperor sat on the first floor on a balcony jutting out towards the Anup Talao with his favourite courtiers all sitting around him. Among them, he knew, there were also his three sons, Prince Salim, Prince Murad and Prince Daniyal but Bishnu could not recognize them. But there was one face he did know – Raja Birbal. And one day he would know the rest.

Tansen bowed and at a wave of the royal hand, he began to sing as Shahid and Bishnu's fingers moved across the *tanpura* strings. The deep voice rose high in the dusk sky and flowed over the listening people as they swayed to the beautiful melody. Bishnu concentrating on playing the *tanpura*, closed his eyes to listen better.

The air was fragrant with flowers and the smell of incense. The lamps on the water swayed and twinkled like golden stars. A soft breeze stole across the courtyard, making the silk curtains sway. Lighted lamps glowed at every corner and flower garlands were twined around the pillars. As the *tabla* and *pakhawaj* kept up the beat, the *sarangi* echoed every musical phrase as Tansen sang it. After a while, Bishnu had forgotten all the royal pomp and glitter around him, he was not even conscious of the face



of the king looking at them. All he knew was that his beloved *Ustadji* was singing his greatest composition, the amazing *Raag Darbari Kanhara*.

Bishnu sat on Tansen's left, on his right sat Shahid, who at twenty was Tansen's most senior student. At some phrases Tansen would turn his head and nod to Shahid and he would sing with his teacher, adding a mellow echo to Tansen's deep voice.

One day, thought Bishnu dreamily, I, the poor man's dhobi singer, I'll sit on *Ustadji's* right and he will nod to me and I will sing with him. *Malkauns* and *Mian-ki-Todi*, *Darbari Kanhara* and *Malhar*. *Thumris* and *dadras*. One day.



Glossary

Angarkha — A stitched garment that is worn by men to cover their torsos. The garment usually has long sleeves and an opening down the front that has buttons or ribbons to tie the two sides.

Ashara — A month in the Hindi calendar in which monsoon rains begin.

Attar or Itra — Famous Indian perfume that is oil based. Attars contain aromatic oils from plants such as henna, sandalwood, rose, jasmine etc and are dabbed on the wrist with a piece of cotton.

Baithak — A room or a part of a house that is used to receive guests.

Bandish — A melodic composition in a raag for vocal and instrumental performance in Hindustani classical music. In vocal music, it is often the song around which the singer improvises and explores the notes of the raag.

Beta — Son.

Bhaiya / Bhai — Elder brother.

Chik — A curtain or a covering made up of very thin cane, bamboo or reed sticks and woven with threads. These are used to shade living areas during hot and sunny days. In the old days, chiks were kept wet during summers to cool the living areas.

Dargah — A mausoleum of a Muslim or a Sufi saint that is regarded as holy. People often come and ask for blessings and make wishes at Dargahs.

Dhobi ghat — Washer-men wash clothes on a river bank or near a pond and these places are called Dhobi ghats.

Dhrupad — A genre of Hindustani classical music that is reputedly one of the oldest forms. Dhrupad usually has four rhyming lines set to any pure raag. Swami Haridas, Mian Tansen's guru, was a well known dhrupad singer.

Divan — A low cot covered with mattresses and bed covers and dotted with bolster pillows. It is kept in the sitting area.

Ganda — The ritual of tying a sacred red and yellow thread on a pupil's wrist as a solemn bond of commitment from both the guru and the student. This was an important part of the guru-shishya tradition of learning and teaching.

Gilli-danda — A popular sport of northern India in which a stick is used to hit a small wooden pallet.

Haveli — A big house usually belonging to a distinguished person built in a distinct architectural style with enough space to accommodate a joint family.

Huzoor — A respectful form of address for seniors.

Kachoris — Small round deep-fried salted Indian bread eaten on special occasions. Kachoris are usually filled with masala, potatoes or dal paste.

Kotwal — A police officer usually in charge of a police station.

Masala box — A box with multiple chambers used to keep various condiments like cardamom, cinnamon, pepper, fenugreek etc. used for cooking.

Pakhawaj — A drum with a heavy sound that is held horizontally and is used to accompany certain classical compositions and dances.

Palki — Palanquin.

Raag — A series of five or more musical notes with which a melody is made and given a name in Indian classical music. Raags are associated with different times of the day or with seasons. There are thousands of raags in Hindustani and Carnatic music styles.

Raag Malhar — A raag of the Hindustani classical style of music which celebrates the beauty of rains and the rainy season. It is said that Mian Tansen could sing Raag Malhar and Raag Deepak really well.

Riyaz — To practice; the term is used particularly for classical music practice.

Sarangi — A stringed instrument that is played using a bow, just like the violin.

Sargam — Various combinations of the seven basic musical notes designed for practice and voice training.

Shagird — A pupil or a student.

Shravan — Name of a month in the Hindi calendar. The months of Ashara, Shravan and Bhadra together form the rainy season that is known as Varsha Ritu.

Surahi — A long-necked earthen pot used for keeping and serving cool drinking water in the summer season.

Tabla — Two drums played with both hands to accompany Indian classical music compositions.

Tanpura — A stringed instrument that is used in classical music to maintain a particular musical scale.

Thumri — A semi-classical composition in the Hindustani classical style of music.

Tika or tilak — A dot of sandalwood paste or vermilion applied on the forehead.

Ustad — A master or guru who teaches a particular subject. This term is usually used in the fields of performing and fine arts.



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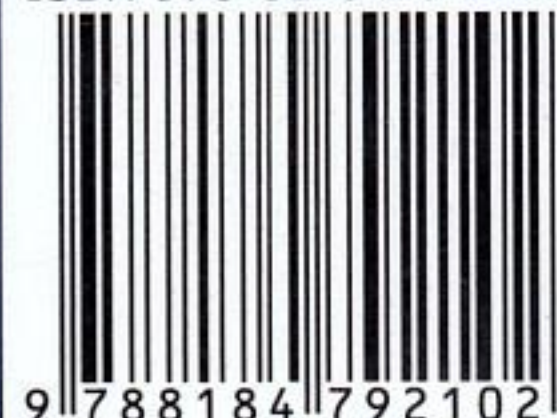
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